A Focus on People and Business . . .

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CONSULTATION

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1 WHAT IS CONSULTATION?

Consultation is a process to:

- Identify what people think and feel about specific topics or issues
- Gather ideas for possible action
- Identify problems or blockages that prevent people from doing their work properly
- Identify individual and group needs, particularly in regional or service delivery areas

The consultation process may involve several strategies. The choice of these will differ according to the nature of the issues being consulted, the breadth of stakeholder groups that will be affected, the time constraints before a decision must be finalised, and the budget available for the consultation process.

Strategies may include the following:

- Draft discussion paper circulated for comment
- Interviews with key stakeholders including unions/individuals in positions of influence
- Questionnaires/surveys
- Focus groups
- Teleconference

2. WHY CONSULT?

There are several purposes to undertake consultation with stakeholders, including unions. These are as follows:

- The full range of views is taken into account before a decision is made. Different stakeholder groups generally have different experiences and perceptions of an issue and can therefore bring different ideas to be considered.

- Decisions that are made might impact differently on different stakeholder groups, and all consequences of decisions should be understood thoroughly before the decision or course of action is finalised.

- Stakeholders (particularly staff and unions) who have to act on the decisions or policies that are made will perform better if they feel that they have some ownership of the decision or policy. Participation in the process leads to “buy in” or ownership.

- Stakeholder (or staff) morale is enhanced if they feel that their participation and ideas are valued by the organisation.

3. STEPS IN CONSULTATION

The following discussion is based on material contained in *Managerial Consulting Skills: A Practical Guide* by Charles J Margerison (Gower 1995). This reference is recommended as valuable reading for anyone wanting to improve their consultation skills.

The key to successful consultation lies in the management of relationships. The quantity and quality of the data gathered by qualitative methods will be largely determined by the levels of comfort and trust that develop between parties involved in the consultation process. The following process outlines the steps that should be followed in gathering and analysing data (the main purpose of consultation) but these steps must be taken in an atmosphere of goodwill and co-operative partnership for the consultation process is to be successful.

The steps are as follows:

Preparation

Preparation refers to the initial thinking and discussion with a reference group that identifies the objectives of the consultation, the type of data that is being sought, and the most appropriate means of gathering it. Questions you might ask at this stage are:

- What do I need to know?
- Why do I need to know this?
- What might this data tell me?
- Who should I ask?
- Am I leaving out any important stakeholder, including unions?
- Who are the people who will influence the success of the implementation of the project? How should they be consulted?
- How can I get the political influencers (unions, professional associations, etc) involved?

Data Collection

- Decide on the methods that will be used – surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, discussion paper, etc.
- Decide on the types of instruments that will be needed and develop them. Trial the instruments with a pilot group to determine their suitability and ease of use.
- Establish and organise meeting and focus groups times, venues, etc. Allow sufficient time for invitations to focus groups and meetings to be advertised and circulated. When interviewing executive staff, appointment times may have to be made well ahead of time.
- Distribute appropriate details of the purpose of the interview, meeting or focus group. People need to know the background and purpose so that the most appropriate people are able to attend and they are suitably prepared to participate.
- Conduct the data gathering process – meetings, interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc.
- As data is collected, store in a logical manner that will assist in analysis and in tracking the data back to its source if required for later reference.
- Write “thank you” letters to all those who gave their time and attention to assist you in the consultation process. Individual letters to all those involved in focus groups may not be possible, but a letter could be sent to regional managers (for example) asking them to extend your thanks and appreciation to the participants.

Provide some feedback on the nature of the data collected and how it will be helpful in gaining your outcomes.

Data Analysis

How the data is analysed will depend on the nature of the data collected and the manner in which it will be reported. The following is a guide:

- Establish a number of areas or categories into which the data falls. This should be the same as those identified in the planning phase, but different areas may have emerged during the consultation process.
- You may like to identify some individual quotes, anecdotes or comments for reporting *verbatim* in your report if appropriate.
- Do a statistical analysis of the data if appropriate. Decide if it is more useful to report raw data or if percentages or ratios would be more appropriate and meaningful. Graphs may be useful. Remember that highly mathematical reporting of data is not useful for most readers. Details of calculations are generally better presented as an appendix to the main report.

Data Feedback and Discussion

Before completing the final report, it is advisable to discuss the data with a reference group and/or senior officers sponsoring the project. It is important to ensure that the people who will have most influence over the final direction and implementation of the project are in attendance. The theme of the discussion should centre around "What does this data mean for us?" and "How can we use this data to gain maximum use of it for the outcomes of this project specifically, and for the development of the organisation generally?"

Development of Proposals

Following discussion of the data, proposals for further action should be identified. In the public service context, these are generally expressed as options. Each option should be accompanied by a list of implications. Implications might include:

- Advantages of implementing the option
- Disadvantages of implementing the option
- Risks associated with implementing the option
- Risks associated with not implementing the option
- Cost and funding issues.

4. COMMON MISTAKES IN CONSULTATION

1. *Confusing a consultation process with an information sharing process.*

Decide whether what you are doing is really finding out what people think (consultation) or telling people what you think they need to know (providing information). Calling it a consultation process raises certain expectations that participants will be able to contribute and that their ideas will be considered and hopefully utilised. Participants become very negative, and even angry, when these expectations are not met because the presenter has set ideas, does not allow time for discussion, does not listen to what people have to say or informs the group of decisions that have already been made.

There are many times when it is appropriate and necessary to call people together to inform them of new changes to protocols, processes, or specific issues. This is an information session and should be billed as such so that people attending will be expecting to be told information that has already been decided.

2. Not being sure of the purpose of the consultation

It is important to be very clear in your own mind just why you are consulting with stakeholders. What information do you hope to gain? How can the stakeholder, including unions help you to achieve a better product/policy/paper/process? Will different stakeholder groups need to be approached differently? Without defining a purpose for the consultation, you will be unlikely to gain useful and constructive information.

3. Focusing on the technical and ignoring relational aspects

There is a tendency to focus on the quantitative and technical aspects of data collection – the "hard data" that can be easily collected, categorised and analysed. However, the real clues to the cause of a problem or situation may lie in the relational, cultural or systemic environment in which the organisation or work unit is operating. These are often more difficult to identify and measure. Identification is often made more difficult by the fact that these things are often unspoken and unacknowledged in an organisation. In the consultation process you may need to follow some leads offered by interviewees or participants in focus groups on what is really important.

5. FOCUS GROUPS

5.1 What is a Focus Group?

Focus groups are *group discussions among carefully selected individuals guided by a skilled moderator who follows a well-constructed interview guide. Ultimately, the composition of the group, the structure of the interview guide, and the location of the interview must flow from a well-researched objective. Like all other research, focus group research begins with and should be guided by a well-articulated purpose* (*Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Stewart and Shamdasani, SAGE, 1990,67).

Focus groups are useful for several research purposes. In the public service context these are mainly:

- Obtaining general background information about a topic or issue
- Gathering new ideas, insights and creative concepts
- Identifying potential problems with implementing a new policy or service
- Identifying a whole of government perspective through the use of multi-agency groups
- Build interest in and commitment to a proposed change

5.2 Steps in running focus groups

The following steps are a guide for planning and running focus groups. These have been adapted from *Focus Groups: A Step by Step Guide* Bader and Rossi (The Bader Group 1998). Also refer to the section on consultation above.

1. Identify focus group project team.
2. Develop a project plan including purpose statement or terms of reference.
3. Identify appropriate focus group participants and locations (regional, metropolitan, etc).
4. Book focus group venues and catering (also air travel, rental cars and accommodation if required). Select a venue with access for people with disabilities.
5. Draft focus group invitations, including dates, venues, purpose of focus group.
6. Establish a method for participants to respond to the invitations.
7. Distribute a copy of the invitation and a covering letter reviewing the purpose of the project to managers.
8. Advertise in local papers if the focus groups are to include community participation.
9. Distribute the participant invitations.
10. Develop focus group agenda.
11. Gather/reserve materials needed for focus group.
12. Distribute pre-reading material to participants if required.
13. Develop effective methods for recording/ transcription of focus group outcomes.
14. Conduct focus groups.
15. Recorder reviews notes from each session, adding details as necessary.
16. Recorder and facilitator review session and notes.
17. Draft report is prepared, summarising data and analysing findings.
18. Project team reviews draft report and makes necessary revisions.
19. Distributed report to key sponsors of the project for final revision.
20. Finalise and distribute report.

When conducting the actual focus group session, the following points should be followed:

- Arrive at the venue sufficiently early to check the layout of the room, sufficiency of seating, and the access to facilities. Lay out name tags and any materials needed for the session. Make sure that water, tea and coffee are available.

- Create an open environment. Greet people warmly as they arrive. Dress appropriately (business or casual attire) for the audience.

- Inform participants of the purpose of the focus group and how the results of the discussion will be reported and used. Confidentiality issues are important.

- Encourage discussion.

- Follow up on topics; probe.

- Clarify all meanings.

- Paraphrase statements.

- Connect current and earlier comments.

- Involve everyone in the discussion.
- Thank participants.
- The facilitator and recorder debrief immediately to ensure that any improvements needed in the process can be identified before they are forgotten.

5.3 Common mistakes in running focus groups

1. *Not being sufficiently prepared.*

While the consultation process should allow freedom for participants to make their views heard and known, there will need to be some boundaries placed around the discussion so that it remains focused on the issues that need to be investigated or resolved. The greatest skill of facilitation in the consultation process is balancing the need for people to be heard and the need for the process to keep its focus. A highly skilled and experienced facilitator may be able to manage a focus group with little obvious structure, but for most facilitators, solid preparation in the form of process to be followed, background materials, activity sheets, etc, can assist this process immeasurably. The objectives of the consultation session should be clearly identified at the beginning of the process and referred to at intervals to demonstrate that the process is being followed and objectives achieved.

2. *Allowing one or two participants to "take over" the session.*

A participant who takes too great a share of speaking/question time can intimidate others who will then remain quiet and leave with their valuable ideas unspoken. When it has become obvious that such people are becoming intrusive, try not to make eye contact them. Instead look around the group and seek responses from others. Occasionally, you could say something like "Bill/Betty has being giving all the ideas so well. I am sure someone else has something to say." This allows the participants to know that you are aware of Bill/Betty's behaviour and are not wanting him/her to speak for everybody. Allow time for others to gain the courage to speak – do not jump in to fill the space too soon.

A participant who continually "pushes" a private grievance or issue should not be allowed to side-track the session but should be invited to speak to the facilitator after the session. Keep to this arrangement, make a note of the issue and undertake to follow it up on your return to the workplace.

3. *Passing judgement on participants' contributions*

It is important to encourage people to offer their opinions. Do this by giving encouraging nods, smiles and positive comments on the value of their contribution. It is not your place to indicate which responses are "good" or "bad". Even if you disagree with the person, do not contradict, argue the point or suggest that they are wrong. Value their contribution as reflecting one person's truth. It may happen that they will be supported by others, in which case, there may be merit in what they are saying.

By indicating either verbally or non-verbally whether you feel positively or negatively towards a response, you will tend to elicit the type of response that participants perceive as being "right". This will not gain you the breadth of information you are seeking. You will have your chance to edit comments later when writing your report on the focus groups.

6. OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

Open space technology refers to a process which is effective for organisational learning or consultation purposes. It is similar to the concept of focus groups, but is more open-ended and less controlled. As its name implies, Open Space Technology provides a space where a group can gather to define, explore and find possible answers to a common issue or problem.

While the content of the agenda is not pre-set, there is a well defined process that, if followed, enables participants to manage their own agenda, behaviour and outcomes.

Further information on Open Space Technology is available on www.openspacetechnology.com